



Chris Grondahl

Habitat changes, fresher water and plentiful food have been a boon to the overall fishery in Devils Lake; however, these conditions have brought about new challenges for the angler who is only interested in catching jumbo perch.

Perch Fishing Trends at Devils Lake

By Randy Hiltner

Devils Lake has the reputation of being one of the premier lakes in the country for large yellow perch. Perch populations and fishing success have varied during the past 30 years or so, but the lake consistently grows perch that are larger than average.

Big, heavy-bodied fish attract anglers from all over the Midwest to fish Devils Lake, particularly in winter, and there were years when many anglers filled five gallon pails with big perch. However, for the most part, this has not been the case during the current high-water conditions at Devils Lake.

In this article we will look at some reasons perch fishing has been so challenging during the current high-water conditions at Devils Lake, and at how the lake has changed physically. Recent creel survey information is summarized and compared with other creel surveys since 1988, along with a discussion on the current perch fishing situation.

Devils Lake Then and Now

Devils Lake has almost tripled in size since 1988. This increase in lake acreage occurred largely between the wet years of 1993-2001. Much of the new acreage is in the western region of the lake. The rapidly rising lake has also produced habitat changes that have been beneficial to the lake's fish populations. Lake water is currently much fresher (lower salt concentrations) than it was a decade ago, which aids

in fish reproduction. There are numerous standing trees that are flooded and vast areas of the lake basin with depths exceeding 40 feet and a maximum depth of just over 50 feet.

Recent Creel Survey Trends

Creel surveys have been conducted at Devils Lake every three years since 1988-89. These surveys obtain information from anglers such as the estimated amount of

fishing pressure (effort), annual perch catch and harvest, average length of harvested perch, percent of nonresident anglers, etc.

The amount of winter angling effort has fluctuated substantially since 1988-89. Fishing effort decreased in the mid-1990s but has since rebounded in the past six years. The increased fishing effort during 1998-99 could be partially explained by relatively better perch fishing as the harvest rate was higher than the mid-1990s.

The angler perch harvest rate during the 2001-02 winter creel survey was much lower and yet the fishing effort was just as high as the previous survey. So even though the perch fishing was slower, the amount of fishing effort remained relatively high. More anglers may have been targeting walleye and northern pike as these species provided lots of action when perch fishing was slow.

Another possible explanation for the strong fishing effort was the increased percentage of nonresident anglers. Nonresident anglers have increased dramatically as reflected in the last two creel surveys. In the mid-1990s, nonresident anglers comprised six percent of the total winter anglers but increased to 21 percent in 1998-99 and 42 percent last winter. Although perch fishing reports were not great, there was still a strong turnout of nonresidents last winter at Devils Lake.

The winters of 1988-89 and 1998-99 had the highest numbers of perch harvested by anglers. These years also had the higher perch harvest rates (better fishing/hour on average).

Even when perch fishing was considered pretty good in 1998-99, anglers only harvested just 3.5 perch on an average angler-day, which is about 4.5 hours. Of course, some anglers had much higher perch catches, but others caught nothing.

Devils Lake continues to grow large perch. The primary food is invertebrates such as "freshwater shrimp," along with various water insects. The average length of harvested perch has remained a consistent 10 inches for all of the creel surveys since 1988, but the number of perch harvested has varied since that time.

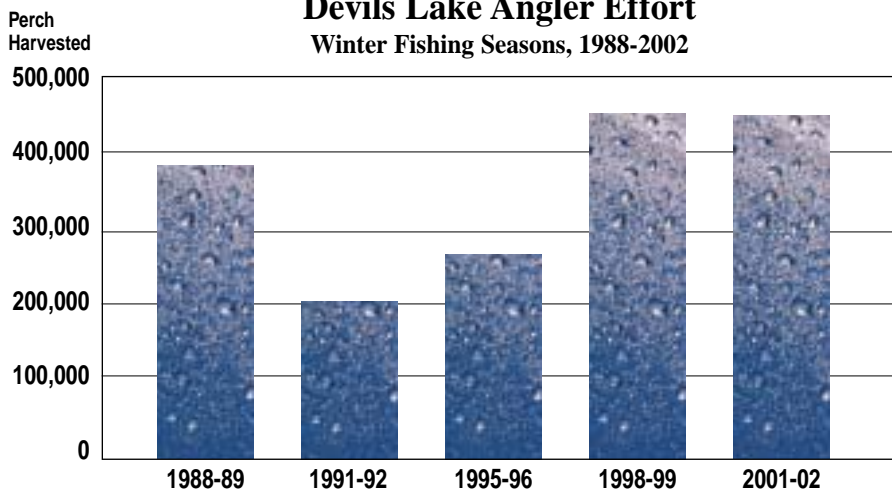
Current Perch Fishing at Devils Lake

The days of routinely catching a bucket of perch on a bait suspended under a bobber in 10 feet of water seem to be gone. Fishing techniques have changed as the lake has gotten deeper. Perch occupy the entire lake basin, so they have lots of room to roam.

Devils Lake still produces jumbo perch but for any number of reasons they are not as easy to find and catch as they once were. Anglers coming to Devils Lake in winter can still expect to catch some big perch, but visitors can expand their adventure by also fishing for northerns and walleyes.



Devils Lake Angler Effort
Winter Fishing Seasons, 1988-2002



Fishing the main basin is a challenge. Finding fish and detecting light bites in deeper waters can test the most ardent ice anglers. Perch are also found in flooded areas where there are standing trees.

Essentially, perch can be found almost anywhere in the lake at a variety of depths. For example, on any given day, perch may be found at 48 feet and at 10 feet.

With a lake that sprawls over 125,000 acres this seemingly “random” location can be especially intimidating when searching for a school of biting perch. Combine this with abundant freshwater shrimp in the lake and one begins to realize why perch don’t just jump out of the ice hole. Many times perch marked on fish-finding electronics are

reluctant biters because they are well fed.

Devils Lake perch behave differently than perch in lakes where they are overpopulated. In an overpopulated lake, schools of perch fight for a piece of worm on a hook and it is relatively easy to catch a large number of them. On average, a typical day fishing on Devils Lake may not produce a large number of perch; however, the average size is good. A catch of 20 perch per angler per day has been considered good the past several years. Typically, less than 10 fish were kept per angler day. The day many anglers hope for when fishing Devils Lake is when both the number and size of the perch is good.

The number of two-pound Whopper perch reported caught during this current high-

water period is down from the low-water years (reminder – the minimum perch Whopper weight at Devils Lake is now 1 1/2 pounds). Fish of this size are relatively rare at any time, but now they are dispersed over such a large area that it is not likely an angler will catch many from one spot.

Although the concentrations of two-pound perch are lower, lots of big perch still roam the lake. For perspective, a 12-inch perch weighing about one pound is a huge perch. Anyone catching perch this size should be excited, as not many lakes produce fish that large on a consistent basis.

Perch anglers also face a dilemma when fishing deep water in Devils Lake. At times small perch bite well in deep water (less than 30 feet) and this becomes a problem for successful catch and release. The swim bladder becomes over-inflated when fish are brought up from deep water, making release impossible. That leaves the angler with two options: keep all perch that are caught, or move to a different lake location in search of bigger fish.

Final Thoughts

Devils Lake is a very good perch fishery. Natural reproduction is periodically good with current habitat conditions. High freshwater shrimp numbers ensure excellent perch growth rates. Abundant forage no doubt makes perch fishing more difficult, but the benefits far outweigh the negatives. The shrimp population will fluctuate, as all populations do, and perch fishing success will be better in some years than others. Which years those will be, nobody knows.

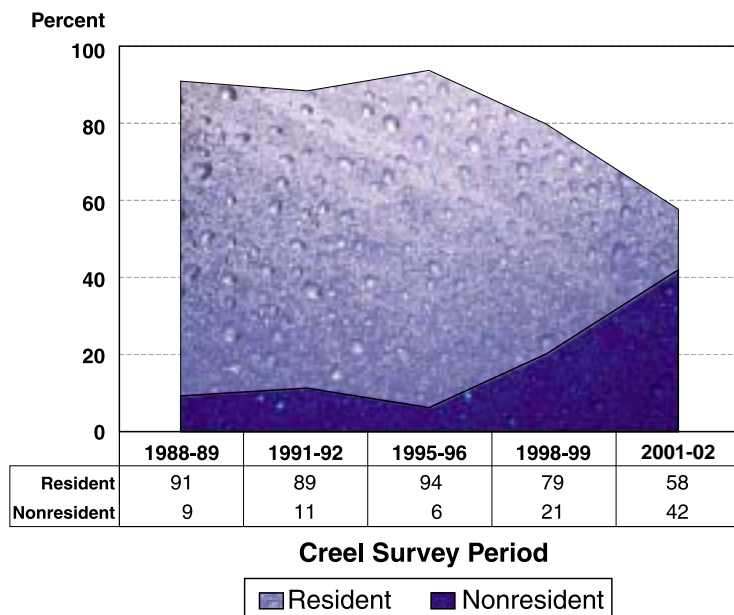
Devils Lake’s large size and good food supplies help buffer the negative effects of heavy angling pressure, i.e. overharvest, which can lead to smaller numbers of big fish. One only has to look at some of the “new” perch lakes over the past several winters to see that heavy fishing pressure on smaller lakes can drastically reduce the population of big perch in just one winter of fishing.

If anglers drive to Devils Lake with the idea they have to catch a bucket of perch a day to be satisfied, they may go home disappointed. However, if they are satisfied with catching a few big perch, along with some walleye and northern pike, that would be a more realistic expectation at current high water levels.

The mystique of Devils Lake is that there is always the wildcard chance of “hitting the perch bite just right.”

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Resident and Nonresident Anglers Devils Lake Creel Surveys, Winters of 1988-2002



Winter Yellow Perch Harvest Devils Lake Creel Surveys

